

'Smart Start' Early Years Physical Activity Pilot in Cumbria



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Introduction

1. Why we need to increase physical activity in the early years

CHILDREN HAVE STOPPED MOVING!

With increasing changes to lifestyles and new social norms around being sedentary becoming widespread, we now have children dying five years earlier than the previous generation due to inactivity.¹ Children are spending more time sitting down or not moving at a higher frequency than ever before. Prolonged periods sitting down actually starts the ageing process early in children even as young as the age of six, hardening the arteries and creating inflammation in the system.

Only 10% of children aged 2-5 are believed to be achieving the Chief Medical Officer's recommendations for 180 minutes of physical activity every day,² which creates an obvious focus on the role of early years providers and parents. So what role can they play and how do we make it easy for them?

2. What were the aims of the Smart Start pilot?

In response, Active Cumbria, part of Cumbria County Council's Public Health and Communities Service, teamed up with the Youth Sport Trust (YST) to deliver an innovative early years approach - Smart Start - created by the YST which develops a range of thinking, social, health, physical and creative abilities in children.

Early years settings were targeted in areas of social deprivation across Cumbria to pioneer the use of physical literacy as a means of increasing physical activity and improving young children's readiness to learn. It had two simple aims:

1. Embedding a sustainable approach to physical activity in early years settings that contributed to the social and emotional wellbeing of 2-5 year olds.
2. Improved engagement of practitioners and parents as a means of increasing their physical activity and contributing to their happiness.

3. What we evaluated

The components of the Smart Start approach covered three key themes:

1. Training and resources for settings to create a more active setting and a Smart Start Club.
2. Resources for Parents to be more active at home with their children.
3. A Level 3 training opportunity for physical activity champions in 28 settings.

The research project, carried out by Northumbria University, was designed to evaluate the impact of the Smart Start programme in Cumbria. The evaluation assessed the impact of the professional development of the workforce and the delivery of targeted physical activity clubs or sessions on the physical and emotional wellbeing of 2-5 year olds, their parents/families and the confidence and competence of practitioners to incorporate this into their practice.

¹ NIKE Designed to Move (2012)

² Start Active, Stay Active Chief Medical Officers' Report (2013)

Key findings and impact

1. What was delivered

Number of courses delivered

4

Number of practitioners trained

73

Number of settings delivering more physical activity
(of which 18 Nursery/Preschool and 28 Children's Centres)

46

Number of Take Home Packs for parents

840

Number of Level 3 Award participants

28

Number of 2-5 year olds receiving regular physical activity sessions

1,200

2. Changes to physical activity levels

Practitioners reported a 20% increase to children's physical activity levels

The surveys asked practitioners how many minutes they thought an average 4-year-old spent doing physical activity in their centre during a typical day. In the first survey, the average estimated response was 80 minutes. In the second survey, this increased to 96 minutes, a 20% increase. Settings also reported that children's levels of physical skills and development when they entered nursery were lower than they would have expected and Smart Start was one of the means with which they were addressing that.

20%
increase

“ In the Barrow case study, one practitioner felt that levels of physical activity had *'almost doubled'* as *'we've got the knowledge to support and information to be able to provide them with different activities, not just the bog standard boring ones they're used to.'*
(Practitioner, Barrow)

Recommendation

Practitioners would welcome opportunities to observe Smart Start in other settings, share practice and establish communities of practice around the programme and physical development and physical literacy more widely. This would also help to build capacity in supporting physical activity in early years.

Key findings and impact

3. Changes to attitudes to physical activity and lifestyle

The majority of practitioners (89%) reported children's enjoyment and participation in physical activity had increased



Observations undertaken during the case study visits suggested that most children in the settings appeared happy to take part in Smart Start sessions and in some cases children who were reluctant to take part in other kinds of activities were enthusiastic Smart Start participants. 86% of practitioners who completed the second survey felt children's enjoyment of and participation in physical activity and play had increased either a lot or a little since the introduction of Smart Start.

“ *The children enjoy it so much. It's got positive benefits for everybody.* (Headteacher, Barrow)

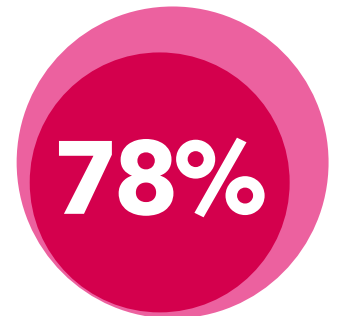
“ *We have quite a few children with special needs who seem to love Smart Start. It engages them in the concentration, listening and attention skills and they seem to come alive when they hear the music.* (Teacher, Barrow)

Recommendation

Practitioners would welcome practical ways of embedding physical activity into the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework and better ways to evidence the impact on physical activity levels.

4. Changes to staff awareness

Awareness of importance of physical activity and play increased significantly



Immediately following the Smart Start training, over three-quarters (78%) of practitioners surveyed stated that children's physical activity and play were very important in their setting. 52% of practitioners in the second survey felt that awareness of the importance of physical activity and play had increased a lot since the Smart Start training.

“ *I've seen increased staff knowledge of physical development; it's brought it to the forefront of the curriculum. The staff like it, the children like it.* (Headteacher, Barrow)

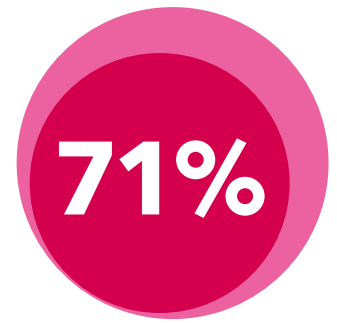
Recommendation

Staff would welcome a clear and succinct method of understanding why physical activity and the development of physical literacy is so important and explore ways that this could be incorporated into their initial training when at college.

Key findings and impact

5. Changes to family engagement

Following training, 71% of practitioners worked with parents to promote the importance of their children's physical activity



The second survey completed after the training revealed that almost three-quarters (71%) of practitioners worked with parents to promote the importance of their children's physical activity. Settings promoted physical activity to parents through giving them information (leaflets and newsletters). 62% specifically referred to *Smart Start* in their response, either through inviting parents into sessions or sharing the 840 take home packs with them.

“ *A lot of parents have said that they do take it home and they do it at home and they do come in the next day and want to do it the same again. The ones that they enjoy the most they're coming in without being prompted and just getting on with it and doing it within their own time.* (Practitioner, Copeland)

Recommendation

Settings felt that they needed to be more focused on the physical development components of a child's early learning that could build on the practical resources being provided through the home packs.

6. Changes to practitioner confidence and competence

Over three-quarters (82%) of practitioners surveyed after the training reported that their inspiration and motivation to improve children's physical activity and play had increased a lot



Over three-quarters (82%) of practitioners surveyed after the training reported that their inspiration and motivation to improve children's physical activity and play had increased a lot, especially among more experienced staff. In the second survey, 95% of practitioners thought it had improved a lot or a little. Asked to rate the training overall, all participants rated it very good or good and 82% felt it was very good.

“ *I've seen increased staff knowledge of physical development; it's brought it to the forefront of the curriculum. The staff like it, the children like it.* (Headteacher, Barrow).

Recommendation

There is a greater need to have whole staff INSET and resources with a clear plan of on staff development in order to make sure there was a real change in practice and confidence to deliver physical activity.

Case study 1: **BARROW** (Summary)

Factors that supported the introduction of Smart Start:

- Practitioners' interest and willingness to engage in Smart Start, supported by the fact that the nurseries' indoor and outdoor environment supported children's physical activity and play.
- The increased confidence that quickly resulted from practitioners engaging with Smart Start (and was sustained six months after the training), particularly among less experienced staff.
- Practitioners' ability to recognise links between children's increased physical activity and the development of speech, language and communication skills.
- Children's enjoyment of Smart Start.

Overcoming challenges:

- Practitioners spoke of children's physical skills being undeveloped when they joined the nurseries. Smart Start helped practitioners to address this.
- Engaging parents with Smart Start remained a challenge – promoting Smart Start activities which required minimal resources were seen as more likely to increase engagement and begin to overcome this persistent issue.

Next steps: Embedding and sustaining Smart Start and physical activity

- Practitioners felt that the adaptability of Smart Start, which enabled it to be integrated with a broad range of activities, had enabled them to embed it quickly into nursery practice and would help them sustain their use of it.
- This was also linked to their ability to differentiate Smart Start's use, for example with different age groups or children with SEN, which practitioners felt would help them sustain enthusiasm for Smart Start and its resources.



“ In the Barrow case study, one practitioner felt that levels of physical activity had **'almost doubled'** as **'we've got the knowledge to support and information to be able to provide them with different activities, not just the bog standard boring ones they're used to.'**
(Practitioner, Barrow)

'I've seen increased staff knowledge of physical development; it's brought it to the forefront of the curriculum. The staff like it, the children like it.'
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'The children enjoy it so much. It's got positive benefits for everybody.' (Headteacher, Barrow)

'We have quite a few children with special needs who seem to love [Smart Start]. It engages them in the concentration, listening and attention skills and they seem to come alive when they hear the music.'
(Teacher, Barrow)

Case study 2: COPELAND (Summary)

Factors that supported the introduction of Smart Start:

- Nurseries' willingness to engage with Smart Start and acknowledgement of the importance of supporting children's physical development.
- The Smart Start training's validation of existing practice, which in turn increased practitioners' confidence in supporting children's physical activity and play.
- Smart Start proved easy to integrate into nursery practice.
- Smart Start was fun – for both children and adults.
- Practitioners' conviction that Smart Start increased children's confidence in physical activity and had a positive impact on behaviour and development in other areas.

Overcoming challenges:

- Children's lack of physical skills and lack of experience of risk-taking in play.
- Parents' reluctance to engage with Smart Start and lack of confidence in supporting their children's physical play. The nurseries were beginning to use the parent packs in particular to try to overcome this.
- These challenges were being overcome by the nurseries' increased emphasis on physical development and developments such as peer modelling, where children were encouraging their friends to take part in Smart Start and other activities.

Next steps: Embedding and sustaining Smart Start and physical activity

- Embedding and sustaining Smart Start was supported by the ease with which it was integrated into nursery practice.
- Modelling by both adults and children was held to be key in maintaining interest and engagement in Smart Start and physical activity and play in general.
- One of the nurseries in particular was hoping that the parent packs, which had only recently been distributed, would help to engage parents in the programme and supporting their children's physical activity.



“ A lot of parents have said that they do take it home and they do it at home and they do come in the next day and want to do it the same again. The ones that they enjoy the most they're coming in without being prompted and just getting on with it and doing it within their own time.'
(Practitioner, Copeland)

Summary of other recommendations

Recommendations for ensuring Smart Start training is effective

- ▶ **Recommendation:** Smart Start training should explicitly address the need to take practitioners' needs and prior experience into account when introducing the programme into settings and encourage settings to work together on this.

YST Response: As a result of the findings from the research and insight we have refreshed the training content with a greater emphasis on children with inclusion needs and re-launched the programme as Healthy Movers.

- ▶ **Recommendation:** Evaluate the potential of offering refresher training, perhaps led by Smart Start networks.

YST Response: We have been working with the National Day Nurseries Association as a result of this pilot to explore wellbeing champions in nursery settings and how they can drive local networks and enhanced learning and support for practitioners.

Recommendations for engaging parents

- ▶ **Recommendation:** Review best and cutting edge practice on parental engagement in this area and engage parents in future Smart Start training.

YST Response: We have considered how the home packs link directly to the practitioner training and developed a set of cards and resources that parents can take home to engage their children in being active together.

- ▶ **Recommendation:** Draw on engaged parents as a resource for modelling good practice in relation to using Smart Start and promoting the importance of physical activity and play in general.

YST Response: We have considered how a wellbeing champion in an early years setting doesn't always have to be a qualified practitioner and could be an engaged and enthusiastic parent leading on physical activity and wellbeing.

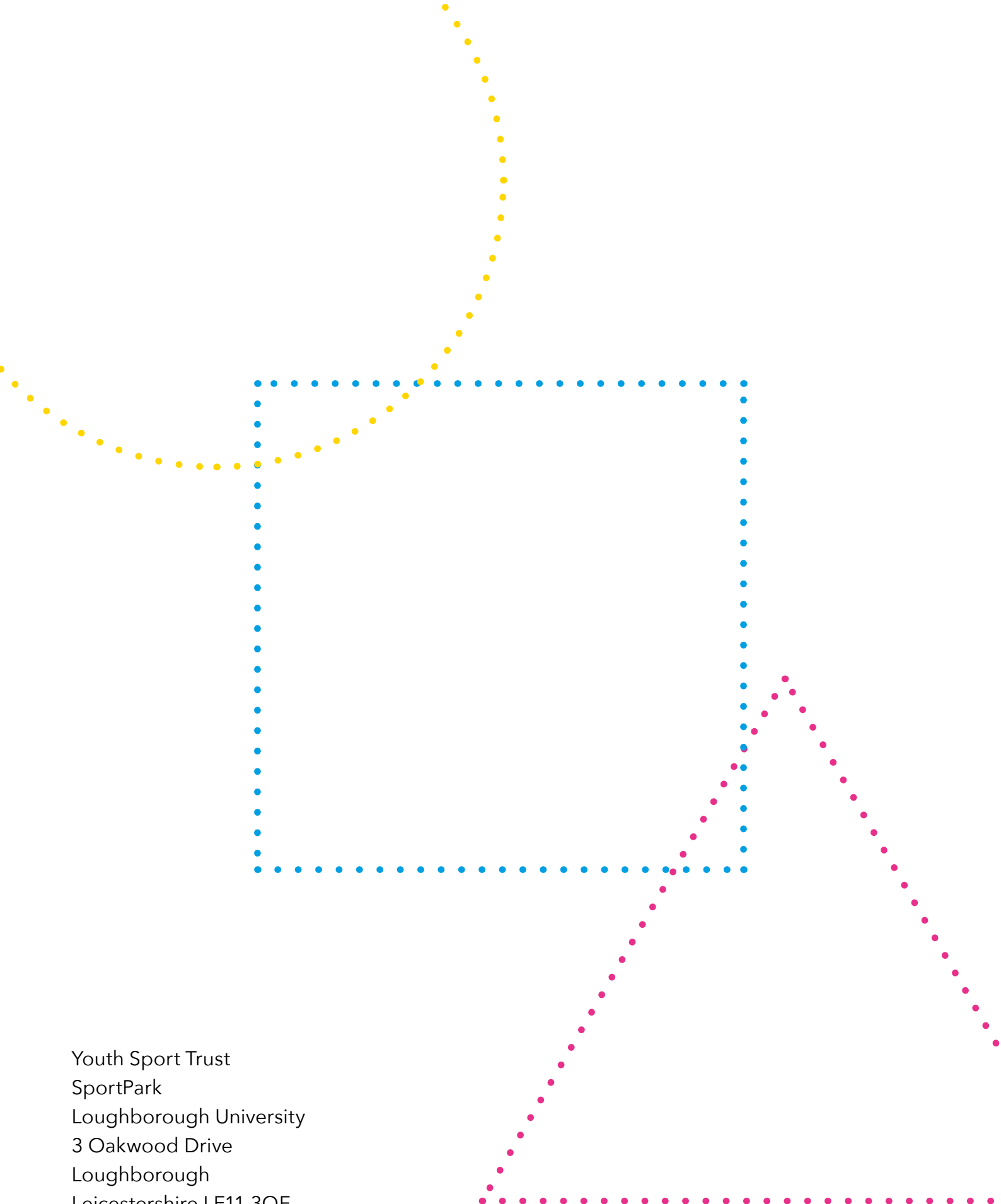
Recommendations for embedding and sustaining Smart Start

- ▶ **Recommendation:** Broker the creation of local Smart Start networks or communities, building on existing networks and relationships.

YST Response: We have been working with the National Day Nurseries Association as a result of this pilot to explore virtual networks and e-learning portals to keep settings connected.

- ▶ **Recommendation:** Review Smart Start resources, particularly the cards, to assess their appropriateness in terms of both content and language.

YST Response: We have refreshed the training content with a greater emphasis on using simple language and easy to follow content that engages and inspires practitioners more.



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